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ABSTRACT

Certainly reasons can be enumerated for the widespread use of handbooks and other "canned" materials in high school debate programs, but the quality of these resources and their actual use by debaters make them competitively negligible in value and counterproductive to the educational and competitive values that the forensic community purports to serve. Instruction in forensics is or should be primarily concerned with the development of basic communication competence. While handbooks are intended to enhance students' research, analytical, and critical thinking skills, their use ignores the pedagogical concern for original research by supplying students with evidence, cases, and briefs. It also undercuts the development of library skills and minimizes analytical and critical-thinking skills by blocking creativity. Although advocates claim that handbooks serve only as a supplement to the more traditional methods of debate instruction, this noble aim is lost in everyday practice. Forensic coaches need to crystalize the educational objectives for their programs. They may then find that the debate community is better off without handbooks, which are costly not only economically, but also educationally, as the use of handbooks extracts from life-long skills--the greatest cost of all. (HTH)

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"Are Debate Handbooks Proper Educational Materials for High School Debates - Con?"

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When I think about the use of handbooks as an educational tool in debate, I am reminded of the proverb: "Easy Street is a blind alley. The easy street the forensic world has taken is the promulgation which touts debate handbooks or sourcebooks as justifiable educational tools. Unfortunately, the alley we are walking down has more than just imaginary dangers lurking in the shadows. Indeed, so prevalent are the abuses of handbooks to the educational objectives of forensic participation, that for many debaters there is the feeling that everything they will ever need to know is contained in the tidy pages of a handbook with their "1000 pieces of hard-to-find primary source only"evidence. Because such a prevalence of handbook evidence and other "canned" material characterizes so much of our debate activity today, the question: "Are debate handbooks proper educational materials for high school debates?" is a very timely issue.

The question reminds me of what Aristotle said about rhetoric; rhetoric is neither good nor bad; it depends on how it is used. So it is with the handbook. Certainly reasons can be enumerated regarding the advantages of using handbooks in high school debate programs. William Bennett, author of Pragmatic Debate supports the use of handbooks with eleven reasons and goes on to say: "When these purposes, or most of them are used correctly nobody should be down on handbooks, the debate world should be clamoring for them."[1] Like Aristotle's words regarding rhetoric, it seems the educational value of the handbook must

[1] W.H. Bennett, Pragmatic Debate, 2nd Edition, (Price Right Printers, Sioux Falls, South Dakota, 1976), P. 118.

be assessed not on the issue of handbooks per se, but rather they should be evaluated on the basis of their use by coaches and debaters. It will be the purpose of this paper to suggest the use of handbooks is inconsistent with the educational and even competitive goals the forensic community purports to serve. The stark reality is that the quality of these resources and their actual use by debaters makes them competitively negligible in value and counterproductive to the educational values that debate as an activity wishes to accentuate.

In order to discuss the concept of education and handbooks, there needs to be at least a partial attempt to answer the question of "What should our students be learning from their involvement with debate?" Douglas Trank writes: "Instruction in forensics is or should be primarily concerned with the development of basic communication competence. This has an obvious implication---forensics education is not merely an extra-curricular game. It must be grounded in academic practice."[2] Thus, it seems the vital issue in this discussion of handbooks is to revolved around: "What practices BEST involves the application of academic theory for the purpose of life-long skills for students?" This issue should serve as the standard by which we apply the discussion of handbooks. Specifically, the role of the handbook is concerned primarily with practices which aim to enhance a student's research, analytical and critical thinking skills as major objectives of forensic participation. Although peripheral skills and values are pertinent, it will be the purpose of this paper to prove handbooks are detrimental to the educational objectives of

[2] Douglas Trank, "Back to the Basics, the Case for Teaching Forensics," ERIC ED 170824, (1977), P. 8.

research, analytical, and critical-thinking skills.

The rationale for research as a primary value of forensics is clear. Eugene Balof in an article from Debate Issues writes: "Possibly no single skill is more vital to debate success than the capacity to recognize, record and interpret relevant facts in support of an issue of controversy."[3] And debaters themselves recognize the need for learning research skills. A recent article by Ronald J. Matlon and Lucy M. Keele surveyed over 700 former NDT debaters and found research skills identified as the third greatest advantage of their forensic experience. The study further ranked research skills as a crucial goal competitive debate should pursue (ranked 3rd out of a list of 37 goals).[4] Clearly research is an important goal and it should be. First, the very nature of debate competition calls for better evidence than the opponent can offer. More importantly, learning to research has an intrinsic value in itself which provides students with long-term benefits. Because most debaters go to college, research skills can be an invaluable tool for them, and debate is uniquely qualified as an activity to teach such skills.

Tragically, the practice of handbooks ignores the pedogogical concern for original research by giving students a supply of handbook evidence, cases and briefs. Such practices start early in the season during summer workshops, which in some cases are fueled by a profit motive to enrich the staff or college forensic programs.

[3] Eugene Balof, "Debate and the High School Institute," Debate Issues, 10 (April 1977) P. 8.

[4] Ronald J. Matlon and Lucy M. Keele, "A Survey of Participants In The National Debate Tournament, 1947-1980," Journal of the American Forensic Association, XX, (Spring 1984) P. 197-199.

Shoen and Matlon point out: "Approximately four of every five students (in summer debate workshops) worked from collections of articles and essays on the debate topic which they received from their workshop instructors."[5] Handing debaters quotations from handbooks does not help debaters to develop an awareness of how to research. Such a practice is often condoned on the grounds: "It gets them ready faster". But such practices violate our educational objectives. Are we to prepare students for purely competitive reasons, or should the debate experience be grounded in practices which prepare the student for future roles as a student and a citizen? I would suggest handing students evidence, briefs or cases subverts the educational goal of teaching students how to utilize the tools of research, a long-term benefit. By teaching students how to use microfil, fiche, special-holding material, specialized indexes and computers, in addition to the more traditional library research tools, the student will obtain a level of expertise not available to students not involved in forensics. We "cheat" our students out of such expertise when we allow shortcuts in the name of expediency. Instead of learning with "hands-on" experience valuable library skills, too many debaters spend their hours cutting and pasting from a vast assortment of handbooks. Any debater or coach who encourages this type of activity is clearly at odds with virtually all educational material which speaks to the cognitive growth which occurs when we allow students to actively participate in the learning process. Consider the hours debaters in most programs spend cutting and gluing handbook materials and compare that to those hours spent in processing original research. The sad truth is the former practice prevails making

[5]Ronald J. Matlon and Richard L. Shoen, "A Survey of Content and Teaching Methods in High School Summer Debate Workshops," Speech Teacher, XXIII (January, 1974) P. 46-47.

a mockery out of many research objectives. As Douglas Ehninger and Wayne Brockriede write: "First and most important, they (handbooks) rob a debater of training in research and analysis. Like overcoaching, the handbooks do for a debater what he should do for himself."[6] I would submit that handbooks represent the "easy street." Handbooks are seductively tempting thousands of debaters to address the research need inappropriately, encouraging debaters to take a short cut which comes at the expense of valuable life skills that can only be obtained through hard work and discipline in the library.

Having multi-drawer files of handbook evidence does not just rob the debater of valuable library skills. The spring of creativity exists in all children, but obstacles of sorts end up blocking the flow. Handbooks represent one such block. They do for students what students should be doing for themselves. As a consequence, handbooks minimize analytical and critical-thinking skills. Some of the fundamental goals of debate training are to train the debaters to analyze, to look upon the raw data gathered from the library and to test its validity and to reason and to draw conclusions. These goals are not likely to be met if coaches and their debaters are willing to condone as legitimate ready-made evidence, cases, and briefs. While handbooks may offer greater success in the short-term for debaters, they certainly inhibit the development of independent thinking that comes from creating and inventing arguments. Ehninger and Brockriede state: "Research is an indispensable part of reflective decision-making. One does not become a debater at the moment he rises to speak or sits down to write. He

[6] Douglas Ehninger and Wayne Brockriede, DECISION BY DEBATE (Dodd, Mead & Compnay, New York, 1967). P. 311.

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becomes a debater long before--when he begins his study of the problem about which he will eventually prepare judgments. Debate is a process that reaches from tentative explorations of subject matter to the final decision."[7] Analysis is a skill that is taken away from many debaters since those debaters construe the handbook as the "end all and be all" on the issues, a kind of defacto statement of parameters for a topic. Further, handbooks minimize the analytical process of discovering issues, testing evidence and reasoning to a level of sound argument. There is no need to, the handbooks do it for the debaters. It is important to recognize the necessity for students to learn independent inquiry, inquiry which should be based upon what will help the student in later situations. After all, is not this the real philosophy for the student to participate in forensics?

Advocates of handbooks and other commercial items will claim numerous arguments that handbooks are not mutually exclusive from such ideals presented above. That is, handbooks only serve as a "supplement" to the more traditional methods of debate instruction. Unfortunately, such a noble aim gets lost in the realities of everyday practices. The handbook functions as a siren's song, luring debaters into practices far below the educational ideals of the activity and often to the exclusion of practices that are educationally sound. Thus, handbooks are not proper educational material for high school debates since they do not serve education, but rather they detract from education. Consider for a moment the more traditional reasons offered for handbook use:

1. "Handbooks are simply a means of getting started."

   Advocates claim the handbook is a good "springboard" for initial

[7] Ibid, P. vii.

background. A number of arguments can be raised against such a claim. First, it is more educational to begin a preliminary analysis with one's own creative powers. There is the educational objective of learning to discover issues independently as a life time skill. The handbook serves as a springboard on the topic only. By "feeding" the issues to debaters on a particular topic, handbooks fail to teach debaters how to independently begin analysis in areas outside of topic concerns. Second, instead of igniting further analysis, often the handbook serves as a defacto interpretation upon the topic. Comments such as: "It's not in the handbooks I have, it must not be topical" are not uncommon in the thinking of many debaters. How many debaters truly read background material rather than waiting for "analysis" handbooks to arrive? Virtually every text on debate suggests background reading as the proper means of starting a topic analysis. Yet, many debaters start with purchasing handbooks and then getting out the cards and glue. Ziegelmueller and Dause state: "You can never be a good debater unless you are willing to spend a great deal of time in research. A systematic procedure for investigating and recording important evidence and reasoning can be of inestimable help to you as you attempt to analyze a proposition, discover the issues, and develop proof."[8] Beside being an improper way to begin the year, the truth is many debaters never get beyond the handbook as a source of information. Some students get the feeling that everything they will ever need to know is contained in handbooks. Many debaters simply stock up on every handbook available, cut, paste, file, and then...stop. Now, this is certainly not the case for very good debaters, but the educational role of the handbook must

[8] George W. Ziegelmueller and Charles A. Dause, ARGUMENTATION: Inquiry and Advocacy, (Prentice-Hall, Inc., Englewood Cliffs, N.J. 1975) P. 45-46.

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be addressed on the basis of what a significant portion of debaters are doing. William Bennett writes: "Too many debaters take them (handbooks) copy the evidence without even checking the articles they come from, and stop there."[9] Thus, as a means of getting started, handbooks cannot be said to be either educational or justified as <u>just</u> a "springboard." The reality of the debate circuit is that the abuses invalidate any such "springboard claim."

2. "Handbooks get students debating quicker, thus accelerating skills"

The argument here is that the handbook helps students at the early tournaments while their theory, strategy, and skills catch up. Again, a number of arguments operate against such a claim. First, let us recognize that good debating requires a time commitment. Any skill worth having is likely to be a skill that requires disciplined perseverance and a time commitment. Are we to sacrifice individual thought, analysis, and research skills with a shortcut? Indded, reliance upon handbooks may actually be linked with <u>inferior</u> debate as pointed out by Diana Prentice: "Along with the multi-file drawer debater which handbooks have produced, there also has been a decline in debaters' abilities to understand the ramifications of what is being read or to use large quantities of evidence effectively."[10] Giving students handbooks may actually preclude an understanding of debate skills and analysis of the topic that comes when that student methodically learns and researches autonomously. What judge has not heard debaters read handbook cards they clearly do not understand and often cannot even pronounce? Third, rather than speeding up the educational process, handbooks actually slow it down. The thousands of worthless cards

[9] Bennett, P.

[10] Diana Prentice, <u>HIGH SCHOOL DEBATE COACH'S MANUAL</u>, Ed. by Tom Pollard, (University of Kansas Press, 1978) P. 17.

contained in the handbooks could actually cost a team precious time and rounds. Ehniger and Brockriede point out: "A second reason for avoiding the handbook is that the competitive chances of a debater are better with it. A speaker who has relied heavily or exclusively on the handbook for his evidence and arguments is not very likely, after the first tournament or two, to be a match for the debater who has dug out his own materials and has carefully read and digested what comes before and after the notes he has taken."[11] Thus, handbooks might get the debater reciting more quickly, but not debating with skill and analysis. When debaters spend hour after hour slugging and filing thousands of worthless cards, valuable time is lost on methods which produce better educational and competitive rewards. To neglect the pedogogical reasons for forensic participation by condoning shortcuts in the name of early tournament participation does an injustice to the debater and to the activity. I would suggest the burden is upon the advocates of handbooks to draw the link between early handbook use and educational values, because what exist now in the early stages of the year is little more than stringing together quotations which are rarely understood by the debaters themselves.

3. "Handbooks introduce evidence or sources the debater has not encountered before."

First, such a "killer" source is unlikely to occur in any handbook. Most handbooks are research months in advance of the upcoming season. So by the time the handbooks are out, such sources are usually "yesterday's news," many debaters have already discovered such sources. Second, most handbooks go for breadth, not depth on the issues. As a result, they

[11] Ehninger and Brockriede, P. 311.

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cover a number of case areas superficially with easy-to-get-at sources and usually only a few at that. I would submit that such sources are likely to have been discovered quite easily by most debaters. Third, the reliability of such sources is often questionable. Perhaps this issue deserves independent consideration, but it seems pertinent to the claim that handbooks offer quality evidence to their customers. Diana Prentice tells us: "Too many teams have lost rounds unjustly because of inaccurate or distorted handbook evidence, and too many teams, who trusted the handbook preparers, have been embarrassed or have lost rounds when the opposing team confronted them with the original source of the flawed evidence."[12] Either by lazy researching or simply by recording out of context, the validity of all handbook evidence is in question because some handbooks have offered an inferior product. Handbooks simply do not offer evidence that debater could not find for themselves. The cost is to the pocketbook as well as to any educational standard.

4. "Handbooks help those schools who are geographically disadvantaged"

Perhaps this one issue represents one of the stronger arguments to be made on behalf on handbook use. Some schools are geographically advantaged by virtue of living close to major research libraries, law schools, or any other specialty library. Thus, the remote, rural schools need a handbook to "equalize" the geographical disparities. First of all, if rural programs were the ones using the handbooks this argument would have more merit. Although most of the stronger programs tend to be situated in "research-rich" centers, it is these stronger programs

12 Diana Prentice, P. 18-19.

who tend to abuse handbooks MORE than their rural cousins. It is not the rural programs who come loaded down with numerous "ox-boxes" of purchased material to the tournaments. Secondly, the extensiveness of today's library system puts within reach resources which are more than adequate for most teams either directly and/or through interlibrary loans. Further, day-long field trips, or weekend "outings" are other means of getting rural programs to the libraries. Too, as pointed out earlier by Ehninger and Brockriede[13] handbooks will not help the geographically displaced by "equalizing" since the value of the handbook at best is limited to very early in the year. Thus, even if there was any validity to the geographic gap to begin with, handbooks are certainly not the means of equalization proponents would have us believe. Somewhat related to this issue of equalization is the matter of handbook cost. Perhaps rather than equalizing disparities handbooks perpetuate them by economics. It is not unusual for teams or individuals to spend hundreds of dollars for the multitude of handbooks available. I would submit the ability of some to "buy research" in the form of purchased materials is more inequitable as an issue than any geographic concern. Proponents of handbooks are therefore in a dilemma: Either the handbooks are good and the cost inequity applies, or else the handbooks are not a real factor and thus there is no reason to purchase the books in the first place. Any claim for the "equalization" issue must address the economic disadvantage aspect of handbooks. Further, any equalization argument still does not deal with the pedagogical concerns of learning research. Whether a team is an urban or a rural program, real life skills should not be circumvented in the name of expediency.

13 Ehninger and Brockriede, P. 311

5. "Handbooks provide bibliographies for research."

The argument here is that many handbooks may be utilized as a supplement to a researcher's bibliography list. Such an argument fails to justify handbooks as an educational practice for a number of reasons. First, as pointed out earlier, many teams fail to get beyond the cut and glue phase of handbooks. Like a mind-altering drug, handbooks create a false sense of security which inhibits a team from real research. Second, the practice is all too common for debaters to call themselves researchers by simply following up handbook bibliographies for their evidence; a practice which obviously circumvents the discovery process for the student. Such a practice flies in the face of the real-world skills debate purports to be teaching. A vital step in the inquiry process is learning to discover sources of information. The cognitive skills and the tangible library skills are lost when debaters simply run to the shelf with their handbook sources in hand. Further, the handbook bibliographies are of dubious value anyway. Raules, Rieke and Rhodes point out: "The bibliography in such handbooks is no more extensive and certainly not as selective as a bibliography compiled by a competent debate squad."[14] It is well to remember what has earlier been pointed out: most sources/bibliographic footnotes in handbooks are generally dated by the time the competitive season actually starts. Statistics or issues from such sources may be outdates and better sources likely have evolved since most topics are quite dynamic in nature. It is also likely the sources have already been discovered by most high school debaters anyway. Certainly the handbook bibliography represents an "easy road" start, but it is a road taken by laziness and a road which sacrifices value life skills.

[14]Don F. Raules, Richard D Rieke, and Jack Rhodes, DIRECTING FORENSICS: Contest Speaking and Debates (Morton Publishing Company, 1976) P. 27.

6. "Handbooks familiarize debaters with cases and issues."

Keep in mind all the other issues regarding handbook use discussed so far: they do not aid library skills, the handbooks actually circumvent it; they inhibit creative thought, the materials actually create an inequity because of economics, and the materials often are of poor quality. We now come to the last major claim for handbooks; that is, they give debaters ideas regarding case popularity and issue development from around the nation. First, this claim generally is only a competitive advantage not an educational one. By proper background reading and acquired skills of analysis debaters will soon learn the cases and issues for themselves -- an educational value. Second, the handbooks more often than not, are simply inadequate as sources of information. While they may often provide some variety of information, there is rarely any depth or issue development. The information is far short of providing any truly unique arguments. Further, such diversity is a myth. Virtually any handbook picked up will cover superficially the same areas creating an expensive redundancy for the debater. Too often the handbooks are characterized by "meatball" disadvantages or generic attacks which are of dubious value to any debater looking for any competitive edge. The major issue is that the exploration process should occur in the library not in the handbook. Thomas McGlone states: "Active debate cannot evade exploration. Extensive research is primal to the very life of forensics. If debate taught nothing more than research techniques and values, its time would be worth the investment...Research is the foundation of academic pursuit, and nothing teaches research more completely than debate."[15] Handbooks are not the answer for such a discovery process. Indeed handbooks tend to impose legitimacy upon certain cases and issues that are highly questionable.

15 Thomas L. McGone, "A Defense of Forensics," NFL National Tournament Booklet, (June 1980), P. 8-9.

The primary position of this paper has been to focus on what is in the educational interests of the students. The issues seem clear: handbooks, or any canned material, tends to fail as a supplement to fulfilling the educational objectives of forensic instruction. The position of this paper further suggests that handbooks as a supplement also fails as handbooks tend to replace not aid valid educational objectives.

The coaches responsible for forensic instruction need to crystalize their educational objectives for their programs. By applying handbook use against valid educational goals, it becomes clear the debate community would much better off without them. Handbooks are not only costly economically, but the price handbook use extracts from life-long skills is the greatest cost of all.

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